



ABSTRACT

This paper presents a summary of part of a larger work which will outline the economic history of the Slavey Indians of the Mackenzie River Basin in the period from 1870 to 1970. It is intended to present preliminary evidence which suggests that the adoption of fur collection as a major focus of the economy of these Slaveys living around Great Slave Lake and along the Mackenzie River valley perhaps at the time between 1870 and 1900 and may have had some advantages. The Impact of Changing Fur Trade Practices On the Economy of the Slavey Indians: Some Preliminary Conclusions Regarding the Period: 1870-1900 economic position of the Indians in the fur trade at this time.

Michael I. Asch
Assistant Professor
Department of Anthropology
University of Alberta

Paper Prepared for: Canadian Ethnological
Society. Symposium on Early Mercantile
Enterprises. Winnipeg, 1976

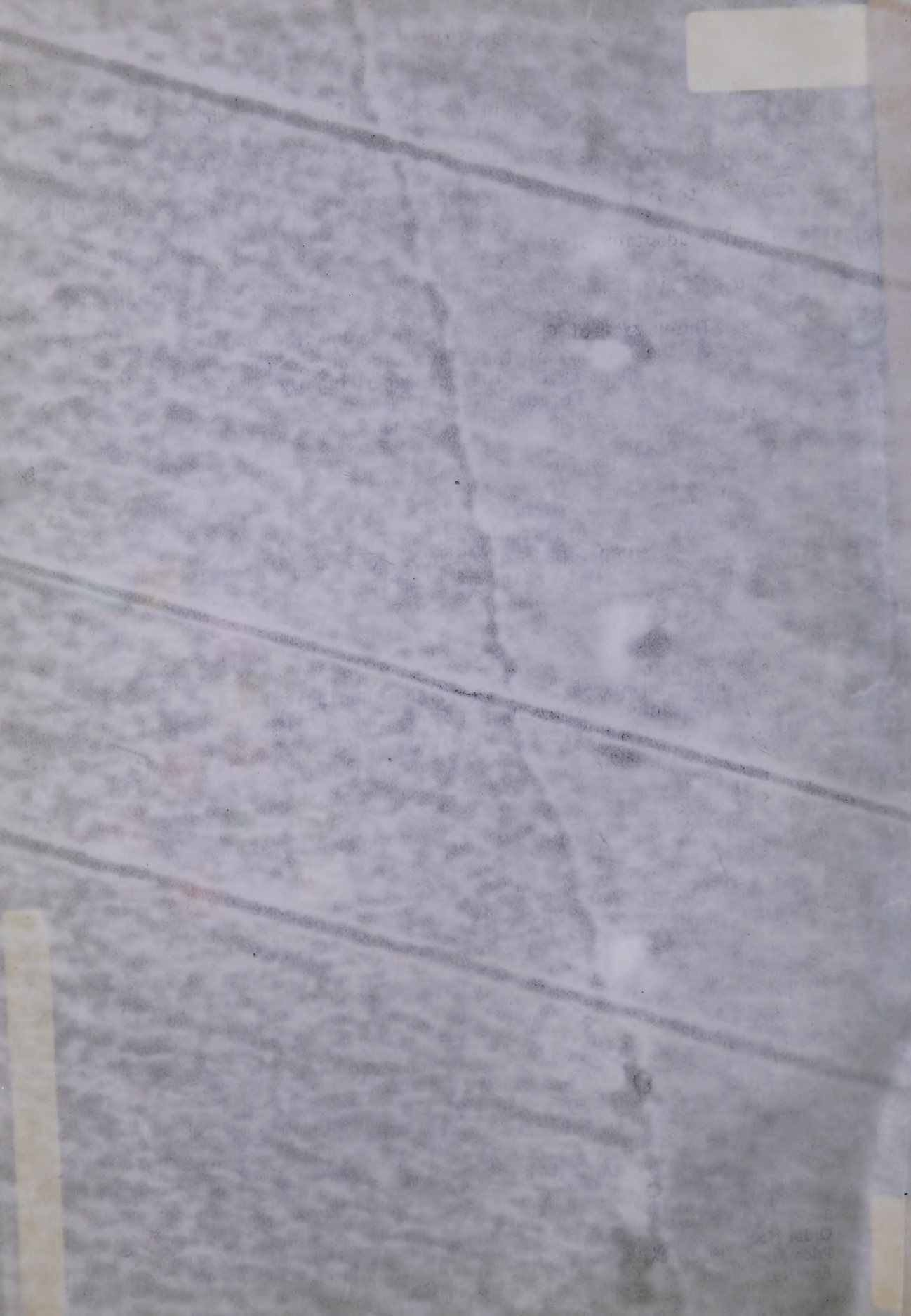
Pam: 675.6:38: (*473) ASCH

Rec'd: Sept. 10/82
Order No.:
Price: Ken Bodden - Xerox
Acc. No.:

48722 BOREAL INSTITUTE LIBRARY

POLAR PAM 5093

POLAR PAM 5093



ABSTRACT

This paper presents a summary of part of a larger work which will outline the economic history of the Slavey Indians of the Mackenzie River Basin in the period from 1870 to 1970. It is intended to present preliminary evidence which suggests that the adoption of fur collection as a major focus of the economy of those Slaveys living around Great Slave Lake and along the Mackenzie River Valley perhaps as far north as Fort Simpson occurred sometime between 1870 and 1900 and may have been primarily a response to the more advantageous economic position of the Indians in the fur trade at this time. ✓

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents a summary of part of a larger work which will outline the economic history of the Slavey Indians of the Mackenzie River Basin in the period from 1870 to 1970. It is intended to present preliminary evidence which suggest that the adoption of fur collection as a major focus of the economy of those Slaveys living around Great Slave Lake and along the Mackenzie River Valley perhaps as far north as Fort Simpson¹ occurred sometime between 1870 and 1900 and may have been primarily a response to the more advantageous economic position of the Indians in the fur trade at this time. One implication of this ~~data~~ is that it tends to indicate that economic change among the Slavey was due more to changes in Indian-White economic relations than to the introduction of any specific new technology.

The paper is organized as follows. I begin by outlining the economic conditions in the fur trade and the Slavey economy around 1870. Then, after examining the changes which occurred in the fur trade between 1870 and 1900, I will again examine the Slavey economy as it existed around the turn of the century. I will specifically be looking at trade good adoptions, subsistence strategy, and settlement pattern in both periods.²

THE SLAVEY ECONOMY AND THE FUR TRADE JUST PRIOR TO 1870

The period of direct contact with the fur trade began in the Slavey region soon after 1789. However, in the period of competition between the North West Company and the Bay, it appears that little of the fierce rivalry between the competitors was transferred to the north, where the North West Company was in ascendancy (Helm and Lurie 1971:352).

In the period following the amalgamation of the two companies in 1821 and

lasting until 1870, the Hudson's Bay Company held a virtual monopoly in the fur trade through out Rupert's Land. During this period, the Slavey region was apparantly considered too remote a fur producing area to command much attention. At this time, fur prices were fixed very low and trade goods imported in limited quantities (Helm and Leacock 1971:354), thus giving little stimulus to increasing fur production. Further, as the Bay required that remote posts remain self-sufficient in provisions (Innis 1962:286, 299), Slaveys could trade bush foods to obtain trade goods, although at times at a lower rate of exchange (Ibid:328). As a result, there was little economic incentive for the Indians to become involved in fur collection.

Under these trade conditions, it appears that the Slaveys adopted few trade goods. Specifically, we find that European foods such as tea, tobacco, sugar, flour, and lard, although consumed, remained a secondary source of nourishment. Further, little Western clothing was adopted. As well, although the muzzle loader or Indian gun was available, it was inefficient as a weapon and very expensive. Thus, it probably served more as an item of prestige than as a hunting tool. In fact, it appears that the only trade goods of significant value to the Slaveys at this time were metal implements which had replaced virtually all wood and stone tools of native manufacture. However, it is ironic to note that these items were apparently often given as "gratuities" in an effort to involve Indians in the fur trade (Innis 1962:320).

Further, it would appear that the adaptation of the Slaveys changed little from an aboriginal pattern to accomodate the trade. That is, subsistence still depended, as in aboriginal times, on the collection and use of a wide range of bush resources such as fish, many kinds of small game animals, moose, woodland caribou, and wild berries; rather than on the collection of a limited range of

fur bearers for the fur trade. Also bush resources were still obtained through aboriginal methods such as snaring and spearing. As well, the seasonal round followed the aboriginal pattern of semi-annual movements from small winter encampments located at the many fishlakes which dot the region to large camping grounds located on the shores of major lakes in the summer. In fact, the only regular trips to the trading posts were three brief visits in October and in March for trading and provisioning (Innis 1962:320) and, especially after the coming of the missions, in December for the Christmas feast (Asch: in press).

Thus, I am suggesting that as late as 1870 Slavey subsistence remained virtually independent of trade goods and Slavey adaptation remained focused on the collection of bush resources with production of furs for exchange relegated to a minimal activity. The nature of the relationship between the Bay and the Indians seems best reflected in a statement attributed to various Hudson's Bay traders who suggest that increasing fur prices alone would only result in decreased fur production. But this is not due, as some modern scholars such as Sealy, (1969:213f) would suggest to the lazy nature of the Indians, but rather to the economic conditions of the fur trade which on the one hand helped to keep Slavey trade good needs stable and maintained at minimal levels and on the other did little to encourage them to focus on collection of fur bearers rather than on a wide range of bush resources.

THE SLAVEY ECONOMY AND THE FUR TRADE: 1870-1900

With the sale of Rupert's Land in 1870, the Hudson's Bay Company lost its monopoly position in most of its former domain and with it lost an assured supply of furs at prices well below world market levels. One region, however, in

which this was not the case was the Mackenzie River District. Here, with the exception of the far northern areas in which Russian and American traders were active, a virtual monopoly still existed (Sealy 1969:220). Thus, perhaps because the Bay required new production to off-set losses elsewhere, the region became seen as a place of potentially significant levels of fur production with assured supply (Ibid:220).

But, before this potential could be fully exploited, two major problems had to be solved. First, due to inefficiency and remoteness, the cost of doing business remained high and the amount of business low; and second, the Indians had to be induced to increase production of furs.

The key to the solution of the first problem lay in transport. Even after 1870, the Bay still relied on York boats and portaging from Winnipeg to the northwest, thus making transport inefficient, time-consuming, undependable, and, above all, costly (Camsell 1954:18-21). The Bay altered this situation by replacing York boats with steam, first on the Athabasca in 1882 and then on the Mackenzie in 1885 (Innis 1962:344f). Finally, after the arrival of the rail link from Calgary to Edmonton in 1891, costs were reduced still further by making Edmonton rather than Winnipeg the staging area for northern trade (Pendleton 1943:29).

The second problem was potentially more difficult to solve for, as I pointed out above, the Slaveys had been living an existence virtually independent of the fur trade at this time. Preliminary evidence I have collected indicates that the Bay seems to have employed the following three methods for inducing increased fur production. First, the Bay began to replace old and useless items which had remained on the shelves for years with new and better kinds (Innis 1962:373). One important example of this type of activity

concerns the introduction of the percussion rifle. Prior to 1870, it seems that only muzzle loaders were provided in large quantities for the northern trade. However, according to Innis (1962:373) as early as 1871, the Bay began to bring in percussion rifles. But, in order to stimulate fur production, Bay policy was to limit exchange of these rifles for furs only, while Indian guns were still traded for provisions. Later, the Company introduced other new items such as exotic foods like chocolate and Western clothing.

Second, the Bay intensified its efforts at "outfitting" the Slaveys so that they could spend more time working at fur collection. One important aspect of this activity was the intensification of efforts at food provision-ing. Although European foods were sometimes used for this purpose, most of the provisioning was done by taking surpluses drawn from more northerly Indian groups. For example, it appears that the main purpose of the establishment of a trading post at Wrigley in 1885 was to obtain bush resources which could be used to provision Indians at Fort Simpson and further south. Another important aspect of outfitting was the introduction of dogs for use in winter transport. Finally, steel traps and the concept of the trap line was introduced at the turn of the century (Helm and Lurie 1971:359f), thus allowing Indians to collect furs more efficiently.

policies

As a consequence of these policies, it appears that by the first decade of the 20th Century, Slavey subsistence had come to rely on many Western goods obtained through the fur trade. For example, by this time Western clothing had replaced virtually all garments of native manufacture save for hand-and foot-ware (Helm and Lurie 1971:359f; Mason 1946:21). Further, certain imported foods such as tea, tobacco, sugar, flour and lard had become of more importance in the Slavey diet. Finally, the use of rifles in hunting meant an increased

use of shells and the introduction of the trapline, on steel traps: both obtained through the trade.

In order to obtain these trade goods, the Slaveys began to focus their subsistence activities more toward the taking of those fur bearers of value in the trade. For example, Sealy (1969:222) suggests that the volume of furs produced during the period from 1870 to 1900 in the Mackenzie River District was quite high and, although lynx production was down as a result of natural periodic shortages, marten and mink, two other major fur bearers of the Slavey region, remained well above long-term averages. He also notes (Ibid:222) that fur returns for the District were quite high, especially considering world market conditions. However, details of the increase in fur production in the period from 1870 to 1900 as well as the early 20th Century are still lacking and thus it is still impossible to pin-point the specific progress of change at this time.

The increased importance of the fur trade on the Slavey also had an effect on their yearly cycle and settlement pattern. While it is true that most Slavey groups still resided at small fishlakes in winter where they now hunted and trapped, it appears that with the use of the trapline, food provisioning, and dogs for winter transport, they probably remained sedentary for longer periods, travelling only occasionally, and then primarily to the trading posts for supplies. In addition, the use of the rifle and the steel trap probably had the effect of increasing the ability of the individual hunter-trapper to remain independent of his fellows. Finally, in summer these groups would come together to form large encampments as in early times. However, instead of using the major lakes as camp sites, they now regularly repaired to the trading posts for the summer season.

For other Slavey groups, the yearly round and settlement pattern changed more dramatically. Some groups, like the Lynx Point Slavey, decided to compromise between the needs of the bush and the fur trade by establishing permanent alternative communities in locales different than those used in aboriginal times. From these, they would venture to the small fish lakes for hunting and trapping and to the posts for trading (Helm and Dameas 1963:13). In at least one case, that of the Hay River Slavey, a group abandoned its winter hunting grounds entirely, preferring to remain located permanently in the trading post community itself where European goods and provisions provided by the Company (and later free traders) could be exchanged for furs the whole year round (Overvald 1974).

Nonetheless, bush resources were still central to the diet of the Slavey and would remain so at least until the 1950s. However, while aboriginal collection techniques were still used in the early part of the Twentieth Century for the collection of small game, berries, and fish; the rifle had replaced snaring for hunting big game, and the steel trap and trapline, the dead fall as the primary method of fur collection (Mason 1946:17). Also, bush resources at this time were often obtained through trade with the Company rather than directly from the land. Finally, perhaps as a result of increased sedentism or the alleged depletion of certain big game animals following the introduction of the rifle³, evidence indicates that the Slavey diet may have changed towards an increased reliance on small game and fish and a concomitant decline in the importance of big game (Mason 1946:18).

Thus, in sum, I am arguing that by the first decade of the Twentieth Century, Slavey subsistence had become dependent on many Western trade goods. In order to obtain these, the Slaveys had shifted from a subsistence strategy which relied on hunting a wide range of animals with fur collection as an

adjunct to one in which trapping was a major focus. In short, the economy had shifted within thirty years from a virtual independence of the fur trade to an important dependence upon it.

After this time, then, the Slavey economy became in some measure dependent upon a continuing supply of fur and a constant demand for it. The former concern was an on-going problem for natural animal cycles and over-trapping always created some instability in supply. On the other hand, through a series of historical accidents, the world market for furs remained stable and strong until the end of World War Two. During this period, the economy of the Slavey remained stable and was, it would appear, little changed in 1945 from the pattern described here for the early 1900s. However, after the Second World War, fur prices collapsed and trade good costs rose dramatically in a post-war and a Korean War inflation. This shift heralded the end of the hunting-trapping economy and was a major contributing factor in the shift of the Slaveys away from the bush and into towns during the 1950s.

CONCLUSIONS

At the outset I suggested that the evidence I would present here would give a preliminary indication that the adoption of fur collection as a major focus of the Slavey economy occurred sometime between 1870 and 1900 and may have been a response to the advantageous economic positions the Slaveys found themselves in at that time. In addition, I indicated that this data would tend to support the idea that change in the Slavey economy was due more to shifts in Indian-white economic relations rather than to any new technological introductions.

I believe that the evidence I have presented here clearly supports the

first point. However, I do feel that some additional discussion of the second is in order. It is obvious that change could not have occurred without improved transport and this is, of course, an item of technology. Further, it is also true, as I pointed out, that the introduction of the rifle and the steel trap had important social and economic consequences. Yet, it is I think also clear that none of these items created the basic shift in Slavey economic orientation during the last thirty years of the 19th century away from hunting and towards a mixed hunting and trapping focus. Rather, I would argue that the direction and pace of economic change among the Slavey was due primarily to the shift in economic relations in the fur trade created on the one hand by the desire on the part of the Hudson's Bay Company to induce increased fur production by raising prices and introducing an expanded variety and quantity of goods, and a willingness, on the other, of the Slaveys to readjust their subsistence strategy to maximize their gain from these inducements. The new technology, I would argue, merely facilitated this process.

Finally, I would like to address a few speculative remarks concerning the reasons why the Slaveys accepted these inducements and were so willing to shift their economic focus. Two factors, I believe, are of significance in explaining this. First, it seems to me that after fifty years of stable and unglamorous fur trading during which fur prices were low and trade goods limited in kind, quality, and quantity, as well as high in price, the Slaveys, in the late Nineteenth Century, must have felt like instant millionaires. Second, I believe that at the beginning the Slaveys, despite all the trade good adoptions and subsistence accommodations, could easily have removed themselves from great involvement in the fur trade and, had fur prices fallen

early, this probably would have happened. However, as we know, fur prices remained high and stable as measured against trade goods for a fifty year period spanning two world wars and the West's Great Depression. During this period, a cultural tradition more dependent upon trade goods and hence a stable economic relationship in the fur trade developed. Thus, by the time the market collapsed after World War Two, the society had become dependent enough on trade goods to be unable to reject them completely and return to the "old ways."

Thus, I wonder if the Slaveys in the late Nineteenth Century would have been so willing to maximize immediate economic gain had they been aware of the ultimate political and social consequences of their choice. Perhaps, but I doubt it. Rather, I believe that they would have acted much more cautiously and like their descendants in the North today be much less willing to accept immediate gain without some control over their future.

FOOTNOTES

1. At this time, I still do not know precisely how far north this pattern extends. I am fairly certain, however, that Fort Wrigley and Fort Norman were not co-opted into the fur trade in an extensive manner until the First World War. On the other hand, I am still not sure as to when Fort Simpson became involved.
2. The primary sources for this account are Innis (1962) and Sealy (1969). This latter document is an unknown but quite valuable resource for the period 1870-1900. Two additional sources which were not used in this preliminary draft but which should be mentioned for the benefit of other researchers are: the MacFarlane Papers, which are the records of the Chief Factor of the Athabasca District during the late 19th Century and are located in the public archives of Canada; and, of course, the records of the Hudson's Bay Company in the period 1870-1900 which have just now become available to researchers.
3. This latter position is presented by Russell (1898:160).

REFERENCES CITED

- Asch, Michael I.
in press. The Slave Indians. In, June Helm, editor, The Handbook of North American Indians. Volume VI: The Sub-Arctic. The Smithsonian Institution. Washington, D.C.
- Camsell, Charles
1954. Sone of the North. The Ryerson Press. Toronto.
- Helm, June and David Damas
1963. The Contact-Traditional All-Native Community of the Canadian North: The Upper Mackenzie "Bush" Athapaskans and the Igluligmut. Anthropologica new series 5:9-22.
- Helm, June and Eleanor Leacock
1971. The Hunting Tribes of Subarctic Canada. In, Eleanor Leacock and Nancy Lurie, The North American Indians in Historical Perspective. Random House. New York.
- Innis, Harold A.
1962. (orig. 1930). The Fur Trade in Canada. University of Toronto Press. Toronto.
- Mason, J. Alden
1946. Notes on the Indians of the Great Slave Lake Area. Yale University Publication in Anthropology #34. Yale University Press. New Haven.
- Overvald, Robert
1946. Personal Communication.
- Pendleton, G.
1943. Life in the Mackenzie Valley. Beaver outfit 273:24-30.
- Sealy, Gary David
1969. History of the Hudson's Bay Company 1870-1900. Unpublished Master's Thesis. Department of History. University of Western Ontario.
- Russell, Frank
1898. Explorations in the Far North. University of Iowa Press. Iowa City.

DATE DUE SLIP

DUE 9AM MAY 08 '96

MAY 08 RETURN

AUG 04 RETURN

RETURN JAN 14 1997

APR 14 1998

NOV 24 RETURN

RETURN

RETURN MAR 02 01

BC
TH
ED
CAL

F255

ARY

